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Not a Minute to Hate

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63
Not a Minute to Hate
CORNEL WEST

This moment is a very crucial one. When we talk about the State of the Spirit 2003, we are talk-
ing in part about the underdeveloped status of three particular forms of spirituality: Socratic
spirituality, prophetic spirituality, and democratic spirituality.

Socratic Spirituality
One of the reasons that we are dealing with such dark and bleak times is because we don’t have
enough Socratic spirituality—we don’t have enough courage to think critically. Socrates said,
“The unexamined life is not worth living.” You have to examine those tacit assumptions and
unacknowledged presuppositions that the dominant paradigm wants to hide and conceal. It
takes courage to think critically in a business civilization that is anti-intellectual, that believes
that citizens are primarily consumers rather than active agents shaping their destiny.

Socratic spirituality begins, not with the self-righteousness of attacking others, but with
examining ourselves. To be Socratic is to ask the most painful questions about one’s self, one’s
society, and the world. We must be willing to make that leap. This is not just about fighting big-
otry, though it is that too. We must be willing to pierce through the mendacity and hypocrisy,
the prevailing assumptions and presuppositions, of mainstream opinion. So, by the time we get
to George Bush, we have already worked through ourselves, and we can be filled with righteous
indignation!

Prophetic Spirituality
All of us can do that work of critical thinking; all of us can be filled with that righteous indigna-
tion. But given all our talk about the ecumenical and the universal, which I also affirm, I want
to acknowledge our specificity as well. I am a blues person. I come from a particular tradition
and people and heritage that has had to engage in a sad but sweet indictment of misery by being
Socratic. That’s what the blues is.

My tradition raised questions, like those about white supremacy, that most of the larger soci-
ety didn’t want to interrogate. That’s the whence that I flow from. We all have our particular
contexts and whences.

The prophets of my blues tradition are Tennessee Williams, Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson,
William Faulkner. There are other prophetic traditions: the Jewish tradition of Amos, Micah,
Isaiah, Abraham Joshua Heschel, rich and deep. The Irish tradition, Eugene O’Neill, with blues shot through, raising fundamental questions. The Islamic tradition of Ali Shari’at and Abdolkarim Soroush—Socratizing Islam.

This nation needs Socratic prophets because it suffers from the belief that is can possess its soul by possessing commodities. Our nation is on its way to becoming the greatest tragedy of human history, precisely because it believes it can conquer the world and not in the process lose its soul.

Prophetic spirituality is the condition of truth, and it is the condition of truth to allow suffering to speak, to allow misery to become visible and paid to be heard. Prophetic spirituality talks about the courage to love and be hurt, and then goes on to enact that love.

In my own particular tradition, one of the greatest moments in American culture occurred in August 1955 when Emmett Till’s body was brought back to Chicago at Pilgrim Baptist Church. The Reverend Julius Caesar Austin stepped to the lectern and introduced a beautiful black woman, named Moms Till Mobley, who was Emmett Till’s mother. Emmett Till was the victim of American terrorism called Jim Crow. Lynchings, murder, mayhem—terrorism is not new to America. What did his mother do when she stepped to that lectern? She looked out and saw her baby lying in his pine box, his head four times its normal size, then she looked out at the audience and said, “I don’t have a minute to hate; I’m gonna pursue justice for the rest of my life.”

That’s a level of spiritual maturity and moral maturity that’s connected to Socratic and prophetic spirituality. What a response to terrorism, to misery, to oppression! “I don’t have a minute to hate; I’m gonna pursue justice for the rest of my life.”

What a courage to love, a courage to think critically, from a particular people who have been so hated! That ability to summon courage from our own tradition is the ground that constitutes the launching pad for our universality. Like Sister Till Mobley, we must learn to dig deep enough in our own traditions, knowing that there are ugly things, but also something precious enough that we can connect with our common humanity.

Democratic Spirituality

Common humanity. You see this democratic spirituality in old Walt Whitman’s Democratic Vistas, in Ralph Waldo Emerson at his best, in Louis Armstrong, Aaron Copeland, Leonard Bernstein, Billy Wilder, in all who say that the condition of the good society is to lift every voice, as the Negro national anthem says. Lift every voice, such that we each can play a role in shaping our destiny. Allow every voice, no matter what color, gender, sexual orientation, class, or region, to play a role in the decision-making within those institutions that guard and regulate our lives. What a grand vision!

We are living in the age of the American empire—and there has been nothing like it in human history. This empire has more scope, depth, and breadth than the British empire at its height, than the Roman empire at its zenith. We have troops in over a hundred different nations, bases in over seventy nations, a defense budget larger than that of the next twenty countries following us put together.

This is new. This empire is, as Brother Noam Chomsky notes, not just engaging in a new doctrine of preemptive strike, but preventive war. We don’t even need the ominous possibility of attack. If our imperial leaders decide someone has the potential to even think about challenging them, they have given themselves permission to invade. This is unprecedented in national relations. Their arrogance is not only a sign of imperial hubris, but a sign that they think they can actually shape the whole world in their own image. It’s an attitude unprecedented in modern international relations.
We’ve had imperialism before—Cuba, Philippines, Hawaii. Texas and California used to be Mexico. We’ve had imperialism before—ask our indigenous brothers and sisters.

But this is new. Today it’s hard to discern any countervailing forces. The vicious Soviet empire is gone. The three pillars of the American empire—free-market fundamentalism, aggressive militarism, and escalating authoritarianism—remain uninterrogated.

Three Pillars

We spend a lot of time talking about Islamic fundamentalism, Christian fundamentalism, Judaic fundamentalism, but there is also free-market fundamentalism. The market is an idol. We worship this human construction. The result? One percent of the population owns 48 percent of the net financial wealth, 5 percent own 70 percent, and that’s before the tax cut! Children are taking the hit. The poor are taking the hit. Working people become commodities to be bought and sold, “downsized,” as if they are simply units rather than human beings. Healthcare, arts, education are pushed to the margins—what kind of Socratic, prophetic, and democratic spirituality can be sustained when there are not enough citizens to question free-market fundamentalism?

The current administration has become quite clear that they are unwilling to even legitimate what they are doing. It’s just an act of raw power, crony capitalism. We hear, “They are my friends—no need to bid.” Or, “I know we lied about the weapons of mass destruction—sorry, about that, but we were gonna follow through no matter what the evidence said.” Such disrespect for citizenship! Such disrespect for democratic processes!

They link their free-market fundamentalism with aggressive militarism. The army is not a study in democratic process either—it’s a working class army, for the most part. I’m concerned about their lives, just as precious as any other life.

This aggressive militarism is inseparable from the escalating authoritarianism of our empire. We already have Patriot Act number one. Now we are seeing Patriot Act number two, the “Domestic Security Enhancement Act” that tightens up the first act. Under these acts, you don’t even find out why you are accused. Our leaders see no need to release that information, because, “We are the government.” Could any statement be more anti-democratic?

This is the moment in which we come together. Facing the greatest empire on earth, we must use Socratic spirituality to interrogate our own complicity in its making. We must use prophetic spirituality to call out this empire’s wrongs. And we must dig deep into our democratic spirituality to remember those who Franz Fanon called the wretched of the earth, our brothers and sisters in the Middle East, be they Palestinian, Israeli, Iraqi, Syrian, Egyptian; and in Asia, be they in Pakistan or India, Japan or China; and in Latin America, be they in Guatemala or Chile. Their lives have the same value as our lives. We affirm that explicitly.

We are looking down right now on the writhing corpse of our common humanity. Now is the time to draw on our own deepest traditions. We must say, “I do not have a moment to hate.” We must follow those deep words with some others, “I’m gonna pursue justice the rest of my life.”